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IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

How to Make Funding and Partnerships Work for Women's Organizations Delivering Gender-Based Violence Services in Yemen

Policy Brief

May 2025

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a severe and widespread issue in Yemen,¹ exacerbated by a decade of conflict,² displacement, and economic collapse. In 2025, an estimated 6.2 million women and girls are at risk of GBV.³ Those particularly vulnerable include girls under 17, internally displaced women and girls,⁴ members of the Muhamasheen community, and female heads of households. Despite growing needs, GBV services remain scarce⁵ and significant political and cultural barriers, such as the Mahram requirement,⁶ stigma and the normalization of GBV,⁷ impact women and girls' access to lifesaving interventions.

Women-led organizations (WLOs) and women's rights organizations (WROs) play a critical role in GBV prevention and response efforts as they are able to navigate socio-cultural barriers, including access restrictions and sensitivities around GBV; yet they face substantial challenges in delivering protection services due to systemic gaps in humanitarian action, in particular **lack of access to flexible and quality funding and equitable partnerships**, which in turn impact their ability to implement long-term, effective GBV services in the country, when international actors are not able or willing to. These barriers not only undermine women's organizations' operational capacity but also perpetuate power imbalances within the humanitarian system.

This Policy Brief summarizes the key findings from a piece of research conducted by the International Rescue Committee⁸ that explored the critical role of Yemeni women's organizations in preventing and responding to GBV. Drawing directly from the perspectives and experiences shared by women's organizations themselves, the Policy Brief primarily focuses on the priority areas they have identified as the most pressing obstacles to their work. While socio-cultural barriers—such as deeply entrenched gender norms, movement restrictions, and the erosion of women's rights—are

acknowledged, the primary focus is on the specific **gaps in humanitarian action that these organizations have identified** as the main barriers to their ability and capacity to deliver GBV services effectively and sustainably, and which we, as a sector, have the power to lift.



Asriya Abdo (30), stands with her daughter Asma (2), at Sahdah IDPs Camp.

Key Findings

A Lifeline for Women and Girls: The Role of Women's Organizations in Delivering GBV Services

Women's organizations are at the forefront of GBV response efforts in Yemen, providing safe spaces, psychosocial support, legal aid, emergency shelter and training and tools for women and girls' socio-economic empowerment. They also play a crucial role in advocating for change, working to challenge harmful social norms and actively engaging men in protection efforts. Their local knowledge and community trust enable them to deliver GBV services in conservative and conflict-affected areas where international actors struggle to gain access and acceptance.

Box 1: Key socio-cultural barriers to preventing and responding to GBV

Yemeni WLOs/WROs face significant socio-cultural barriers in delivering GBV services. These barriers stem from deep-rooted gender norms, a highly patriarchal society, and setbacks in women's rights, particularly in De-Facto Authority (DFA) controlled areas. The cultural sensitivities around protection issues, especially GBV, is the main socio-cultural challenge identified by WLO/WRO informants. Other barriers shared include risks of threats and violence due to their GBV work and their active engagement in challenging social and gender norms; delays in approvals for projects due to mistrust or a lack of understanding of GBV issues by the authorities, and movement restrictions, especially the Mahram requirement.

Despite these challenges, **WLOs/WROs demonstrate resilience and adaptability by leveraging their deep community ties and cultural knowledge.** They have developed strategic approaches to navigate restrictions, such as using culturally acceptable language; negotiating with authorities and leveraging relationships to secure approvals, and utilizing local staff to circumvent movement restrictions.

Ultimately, WLOs/WROs challenge donors' assumptions that socio-cultural barriers are the primary obstacles to GBV work. **Instead, gaps in humanitarian action remain the more pressing challenge.**

Key Finding 1: Funding Does Not Reach Women's Organizations Providing GBV Services

Access to funding remains one of the most significant challenges for WLOs/WROs. Several factors affect women's organizations ability and capacity to access international funding. In particular:

- A. **Funding to WLOs/WROs remains severely insufficient and mostly channelled through international organizations or UN agencies.**⁹ When available, limited funding for WLOs primarily benefits a small number of well-established national organizations, typically based in Yemen's major cities.¹⁰ Positive shifts may be underway, with the Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF) committing in 2023 to increasing funding for L/NGOs to 50%, with a focus on WLOs. While an important development, funding from the YHF only represented 3% of the overall humanitarian funding for Yemen in 2024.

- B. **Donors and INGOs expect women's organizations to conform to their existing funding models.** They apply the same policies and requirements to international, national, and local organizations alike.¹¹ Restrictive eligibility criteria, language barriers, and limited access to technology and administrative requirements are identified as some of the main barriers to accessing funding.



“Whenever there is a call for proposals, donors stipulate that local NGOs demonstrate financial capacity for managing a budget of \$1 million, at minimum. We simply cannot compete.”
(WLO Representative)

- C. **Limited access to information about available funding opportunities and awareness of donors' processes.**¹² Donors often release calls for proposals exclusively to their existing database of partners or through channels that may be inaccessible to smaller or emerging organizations. Lack of transparency around the selection process, WLOs/WROs' limited awareness and understanding of funding mechanisms also make it more difficult for them to apply for and diversify their funding sources.
- D. **Women's organizations have limited opportunities to share their impact and make themselves known.** This results in missed funding opportunities that go to well-known organizations that have higher visibility.
- E. **Donors do not meet women's organizations' self-identified funding needs.** GBV prevention and response remains poorly funded,¹³ and donors' interests continue to heavily influence INGOs' programmatic areas, push NGOs including WLOs/WROs to “follow the money”, and divert their focus to other sectors. Funding is often short-term and project-based. As a result, WLOs/WROs find it challenging to invest in their organizations and deliver sustainable GBV interventions. Overhead costs are also rarely covered and security related expenses often excluded from budget lines. This is often despite women delivering GBV services facing daily threats of violence and security risks, including harassment, intimidation physical and online¹⁴ violence, attacks¹⁵ and arrests.¹⁶



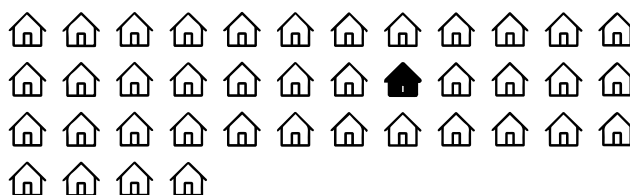
Spotlight: The cost of underfunding on GBV interventions in Yemen

Funding shortages for GBV lead to severe disruptions in service delivery, leaving thousands of GBV survivors, as well as women and girls at risk, without access to essential protection and support. Many services, such as Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS), operate inconsistently, opening and closing based on fluctuating funding availability.¹⁷



In 2024, only 51% of women and girls who needed it accessed WGSS.¹⁸

Only 3% of safe spaces were functional.



UNFPA and its implementing partners have had to cut GBV work plans by 25% due to reduced funding, affecting service accessibility, transportation support, mobile teams, and empowerment programs.¹⁹



“Women travel for hours to reach a safe space, only to find an abandoned building because the funding ran out.”
(Key informant, INGO)

Key Finding 2: Inequitable Partnerships Continue to Dominate Relationships Between International Organizations and Women's Organizations

Despite global commitments to increasing women's organizations' funding, leadership and participation, and notable progress in advancing the localization agenda forward in Yemen,²⁰ partnerships between international and local organizations, including WLOs/WROs, remain slow.²¹ The research identified the following key barriers to equitable partnerships:

- A. **Donors and INGOs treat women's organizations as service providers rather than strategic partners and equal collaborators,** excluding them from decision-making, project design, and funding allocations.²² Donors also often prioritize the "quantity" of partnerships over their "quality", reducing localization efforts to a box-ticking exercise rather than fostering genuine, long-term collaboration. There are efforts from very few INGOs to support equitable partnerships by involving partners from the initial stage of the project development.²³ One WLO representative shared that "they collaborated with the donor [INGO] during the proposal-writing phase, contributing to the design of activities and the project framework." However, this approach remains infrequent and may not necessarily guarantee shared decision making in the delivery of projects.²⁴
- B. **Partnership roles and responsibilities remain unequally distributed and not mutually shared.** While some INGOs are making progress toward fulfilling their equitable partnership commitments, significant gaps persist in roles and responsibilities in the implementation of projects. Financial management, in particular, remains a primary concern for INGOs and donors, and the lack of efforts to adapt requirements and expectations reinforces distrust and negative perceptions of partners' capacity.²⁵
- C. **Risk sharing remains a major gap in many partnerships between donors/INGOs and L/NGOs, including WLOs.** International actors continue to place disproportionate financial and operational risks on local partners responsible for delivering projects, including GBV interventions. The Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) is working towards addressing this gap. It has begun piloting a risk-sharing framework in Yemen through its Yemen Joint Response (YJR). While these initial efforts primarily focus on risk management rather than equitable risk distribution, they represent an important step toward fostering dialogue on understanding and addressing the risks faced by local partners within a consortium approach.



Bodor preparing lunch for her children,
District, Al Dhale Governorate.

- D. **Capacity-related components of partnerships are still largely framed as “capacity-building” or “capacity-strengthening”.** International partners tend to determine partners’ capacity needs —typically organizational capacity and their ability to meet donor requirements. This approach excludes national and local partners from jointly identifying their own capacity needs and priorities. It also reinforces a partnership model that replicates INGOs’ ways of working, policies, and strategic vision,²⁶ rather than supporting the long-term development and autonomy of local organizations.

While capacity-strengthening acknowledges the existing skills and expertise of partners, truly equitable partnerships should also emphasize capacity-sharing. INGOs should recognize and learn from the experiences, knowledge, and skills of their partners, shifting the focus away from a perceived “lack of capacity” toward a model of mutual learning and collaboration.

- E. **There is a disconnect between INGOs’ agendas and the local norms and cultures that WLOs/WROs live and work Within.** INGOs often impose predefined project frameworks that do not always align with the priorities or contextual knowledge of WLOs/WROs. While some INGOs acknowledge this issue, little is being done to change the status quo. As a result, partnership parameters and requirements tend to neglect the local context.

For example, the evaluation of the NASEEJ’s project,²⁷ found that Oxfam’s feminist guided tools did not align with local sensitivities, noting that in some countries, including Yemen,²⁸ feminism is a sensitive issue, often perceived negatively as the “product of a Western agenda”.²⁹ It is also variably understood amongst Yemenis and often viewed suspiciously.³⁰

- F. **WLOs/WROs can sometimes be overlooked for partnerships due to structural gender biases within the humanitarian system.** Some WLO and INGO respondents highlighted the challenges smaller women’s organizations face in being seen as worthy of partnership opportunities and funding,³¹ compared to other L/NGOs, which are often male-led.³² One WLO representative noted that “localization efforts have not prioritized gender equity. Even within local partnerships, male-led organizations get the big contracts, while WLOs are given small roles.” This reflects an inherent bias³³ - which some WLOs/WROs believe includes a gender bias³⁴ - towards local and national organizations, which are seen as lacking capacity and expertise to deliver projects.



Women travel for hours to reach a safe space, only to find an abandoned building because the funding ran out.”
(Key informant, INGO)



Sahdah IDPs Camp, Qa'atabah, Al-Dhale'e, Yemen.
Asma and Dr. Saihaam Al-Junaid.

Key Finding 3: A Strong Gender Perspective is Lacking from Nationally-Led Localization Efforts

While Yemeni NGOs have taken a lead role in shaping the localization agenda in Yemen, efforts to include a gender perspective, and WLOs/WROs' issues in accessing funding and strategic partnerships remain largely unaddressed. In particular:

- A. **Smaller and informal WROs/WLOs are insufficiently included in Yemeni-led localization efforts.** Although national and well-established WROs/WLOs are included – and some take an important role in NGO-led localization initiatives, the different levels of exclusion within the Yemeni civil society landscape itself are not acknowledged and highlighted in localization efforts. The voices of local women's organizations in their diversity are mostly unheard, and their specific needs and challenges invisible. Additionally, while some national NGOs (including a small number of well-established WLOs) have access to and actively engage in the localization agenda within the humanitarian coordination response, they are not leveraging their position to advocate for greater prioritization of women's organizations in all their diversity. This limitation has been acknowledged by some national actors themselves.
- B. **Well-established NGOs and WLOs are reluctant to support smaller and local women's organizations due to limited funding and influencing opportunities.** This is despite the recognition amongst both international and national organizations that “localizing localization” is a critical step towards ensuring the delivery of essential services to the most in need, including women and girls, in hard-to-reach areas.

There are however some **positive examples** of national organizations actively working to support and empower local women's organizations by helping them build capacity, grow, and access funding opportunities. For instance, the Yemen National NGO Forum plays a key role in enhancing WLOs' engagement by supporting membership mechanisms, advocacy efforts, and participation in humanitarian response plans. Additionally, it provides tailored capacity-building programs designed specifically to strengthen the skills and operational capacity of WLOs. There are also **encouraging signs that WLO-led networks are getting increasingly involved in broader localization efforts in Yemen.** For example, the Yemeni Women Leaders Network (YWLN) is connected to the CSOs' Initiative for the Localization and Optimization of Response in Yemen and engaged in the establishment of a NEAR Network supported Localization Lab in Yemen.³⁵



We have to reach those at the local level and advocate also for them, not only for those who are strong or at the national level.”

(Key informant, NGO Representative)



Dr. Shahirah Faried, and Dr. Shahirah while arriving and then leaving the camp.

Conclusion

Women's organizations in Yemen play a vital role in addressing GBV, providing essential services like safe spaces, psychosocial support, legal aid, and emergency shelter—often in areas beyond the reach of international actors. Their deep community ties enable them to serve women and girls effectively despite multiple socio-cultural challenges. However, they face **severe funding constraints**, limiting their ability to sustain long-term services and forcing reliance on short-term projects, with some shutting down entirely.

These challenges are compounded by inequitable humanitarian partnerships that sideline them from decision-making. Amid unprecedented humanitarian funding cuts, it is crucial to prioritize funding women's organizations, **ensuring they receive the resources and leadership opportunities necessary to drive meaningful change.**

Recommendations

The following recommendations highlight the need for coordinated and multi-stakeholder action:

Shift Power to WLOs/WROs, including by:

- A. Developing a clear and jointly developed definition of “localization” that includes a focus on WLOs/WROs.
- B. Moving from quantitative and “box ticking” partnerships to strategic partnerships that enable WLOs/WROs to lead, manage, and define project interventions.
- C. Ceding space to WLOs/WROs on influencing platforms, prioritising diversity of voices and experiences over INGOs' visibility and control of the narrative.
- D. Implementing affirmative action policies for WLOs/WROs by requiring localization efforts to actively prioritize women's organizations' leadership, ensuring that these organizations are not just participants but decision-makers.

Adapting existing funding structure mechanisms and processes to fit WLOs WROs' needs and capacity, including by:

- A. Ensuring greater transparency and inclusion of WLOs/WROs in funding calls and allocations.
- B. Adapting grant application processes and eligibility criteria for funding to the needs of diverse groups of WLOs/WROs.
- C. Allowing WLOs/WROs to determine their own funding priorities, including movement-building, institutional capacity strengthening, operational costs, and advocacy.
- D. Introducing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress and impact of localization efforts using disaggregated data on the type, size and location of organizations.

- E. WLOs/WROs are allowed to determine their own funding priorities, including movement-building, institutional capacity strengthening, operational costs, and advocacy.
- F. WLOs/WROs can shift resources within their existing budgets based on real-time needs.
- G. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are introduced to track progress and impact of localization efforts using disaggregated data on the type, size and location of organizations.

Prioritizing capacity strengthening based on WLOs/WROs self-identified needs and priorities, including by:

- A. Funding well-established national WLOs/WROs delivering GBV services to support and mentor smaller and informal women's organizations' leaders.
- B. Strengthening WLOs/WROs led networks through financial and technical support.

Increasing peer-to-peer coordination, collaboration and exchange, including by:

- A. Setting up peer-to-peer learning and collaboration mechanisms/fora, including between women's organizations and INGOs willing to and interested in increasing funding and access to equitable partnerships, and between INGOs delivering/looking to implement equitable partnerships with WLOs/WROs.
- B. Creating space for shared learning and networking between WLOs/WROs partners delivering GBV services to meet regularly and discuss learnings and experiences.

Strengthening advocacy on women-led localization, including by:

- A. Forming WLOs/WROs alliances to push for policy changes and stronger representation in humanitarian leadership structures.
 - B. Including the funding needs of WLOs/WROs delivering GBV services as a key ask in high level advocacy engagement and in advocacy statements/positions released by international and/or national organizations and in the work of civil-society led and internationally localization initiatives.
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- ² The International Rescue Committee (2019) Protection, Participation and Potential Women and Girls in Yemen's War.
- ³ OCHA (2025) Yemen Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025 (January 2025).
- ⁴ The International Rescue Committee (2020) Narrowing the gender gap in Yemen: A gender analysis by the IRC; Oxfam (2020) Naseej Project Baseline Report.
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- ⁷ Oxfam Italia (2020) Naseej Project Baseline Report.
- ⁸ The research was based on a desk review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and online surveys conducted among Yemeni WLOs/WROs and NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies and the Government of Yemen. A total of 26 organizations participated in KIIs, 12 WLOs/WROs. In addition, 18 national and international organizations completed the online questionnaires.
- ⁹ IRC KIIs, WLOs, NGOs, INGOs.
- ¹⁰ IRC KIIs, WLOs, INGOs.
- ¹¹ IRC KIIs, WLOs.
- ¹² IRC KIIs, WLOs, INGOs, NGOs, INGO online questionnaire.
- ¹³ UNFPA and GBV AoR (2023) The Cost of Inaction – Gender-Based Violence in Yemen.
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- ²⁰ See for example Yemen Humanitarian Country Team (2023) Yemen HCT Localization Strategy and Action Plan (2024-2026); and CSOs' Initiative for the Localization and Optimization of Response in Yemen.
- ²¹ Inter-agency Humanitarian Evaluation (2022) Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the Yemen crisis.
- ²² IRC KIIs, WLOs, INGOs, researcher.
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- ²⁴ Tamdeen Youth Foundation, Itar for Social Deelopment, Humanitarian Advisory Group and ICVA (2023) Measuring Humanitarian Localisation in Yemen – Baseline report November 2022.
- ²⁵ IRC KIIs, INGO.
- ²⁶ IRC KIIs, INGO.
- ²⁷ Oxfam Italia and Gender Development Research & Studies Center (2023) Financial Support to Civil Society to Combat SGBV in Fragile Contexts: Learnings on sub-granting to women rights organisations and civil society organisations in Yemen, Iraq and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. NASEEJ was an Oxfam-led four-year multi-country project, implemented in Yemen, Iraq and Occupied Palestinian Territories. It focused on

advancing the GBV agenda in the region. In Yemen, Oxfam sub-granted 4 WLOs/WROs working on the frontline to deliver GBV services and raise awareness of GBV within targeted communities. More information available at [Connecting Voices and Action to End Violence against Women and Girls in the MENA Region.](#)

²⁸ IRC KIIs, INGO.

²⁹ Oxfam Italia and Gender Development Research & Studies Center (2023) [Financial Support to Civil Society to Combat SGBV in Fragile Contexts: Learnings on sub-granting to women rights organisations and civil society organisations in Yemen, Iraq and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.](#)

³⁰ Yemen Policy Center (2024) [INGOs must navigate feminism and women's empowerment with cultural sensitivity to avoid a backlash.](#)

³¹ IRC KIIs, researcher. See also: Tamdeen Youth Foundation (2024) [The Constraints Facing Women's Organizations in Taiz Governorate.](#)

³² IRC KIIs, researcher.

³³ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies (2024) [Development is Coming: Be Careful What You Wish For.](#)

³⁴ IRC KIIs, WLOs.

³⁵ IRC KIIs, WLOs.

³⁴ IRC KIIs, WLOs.





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